

940 3453

A SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

FROM

**THE BELGIAN BISHOPS TO
PUBLIC OPINION.**

**THE STORY OF THE BELGIAN
DEPORTATIONS.**

LONDON :
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE, LIMITED,

1916.

Walter Clinton Jackson Library
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
Special Collections & Rare Books

WORLD WAR I PAMPHLET COLLECTION

A SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

FROM

THE BELGIAN BISHOPS TO
PUBLIC OPINION.

THE STORY OF THE BELGIAN
DEPORTATIONS.

LONDON :
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE, LIMITED,

1916.

Spec Coll

Δ

639

DSM4

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Lyrasis Members and Sloan Foundation

MECHLIN,

November 7, 1916.

A SIGNAL OF DISTRESS FROM THE BELGIAN
BISHOPS TO PUBLIC OPINION.

Every day the military authorities deport thousands of inoffensive citizens from Belgium to Germany, and there condemn them to forced labour.

As early as the 19th of October, we addressed a protest to the Governor-General, a copy of which was handed to the representatives of the Holy See, Spain, the United States, and Holland, in Brussels; the Governor-General, however, replied with a refusal to entertain our cause.

At the date of our protest, the decrees of the occupying Power threatened only the unemployed; but at present, all able-bodied men are being carried off indiscriminately,

packed into open trucks, and sent away, we know not where, like a gang of slaves.

The enemy is taking the districts in turn. We had heard vague rumours of arrests having been made in the zone of the Depôts, at Tournai, at Ghent, and at Alost, but we did not know under what conditions. Between October 24 and November 2 raids were carried out in the district of Mons, Quiévrain, Saint Ghislain and Jemappes, from 800 to 1,200 men a day being seized. Tomorrow, and on succeeding days, the blow is to fall upon the district of Nivelles. The following is a sample of the proclamations posted to announce the outrage :—

“By order of the Kreischef, all persons of the male sex over 17 years of age are called upon to present themselves at the Place Saint Paul, at Nivelles, on November 8, 1916, at 8 o'clock (Belgian time), 9 o'clock (German time), bringing their identity cards, and, in case of necessity, their cards from the Meldeamt.

“ The only luggage allowed will be small hand-baggage. Any person who fails to present himself will be forcibly deported to Germany, and will further be liable to a heavy fine and a long term of imprisonment.

“ Priests, doctors, lawyers and school-masters are not to present themselves.

“ Burgomasters will be held responsible for due execution of this order, which must be immediately brought to the knowledge of the inhabitants.”

An interval of 24 hours is allowed to elapse between the posting of the placard and deportation.

Under the pretext of public works to be carried out on Belgian soil, the occupying Power had made an attempt to obtain from the Communes lists of unemployed workmen. The majority of the Communes proudly refused to furnish these.

Three Orders of the Governor-General's were designed to make ready for the blow that falls upon us to-day.

On August 15, 1915, a first Order imposed forced labour on the unemployed, under penalty of imprisonment and fine ; but it declared that the labour in question was only to be applied to works on Belgian soil, and that any infringement would be tried in the Belgian Courts.

A second Order, dated May 2, 1916, reserves to the German authorities the right of giving work to the unemployed, and threatens any person causing work to be executed without the sanction of the Governor-General, with three years' imprisonment and a fine of 20,000 marks.

By virtue of this same Order, the jurisdiction which had been conceded to the Belgian Courts passes into the hands of the German authorities. A third Order, dated May 13, 1916, "authorises Governors, military commandants, and heads of districts to order the unemployed to be removed by force to the places where they are to work." Thus forced labour was already introduced, but it was in Belgium.

To-day, it is no longer a question of forced labour in Belgium, but in Germany, and for the benefit of the Germans.

To give an appearance of plausibility to these violent measures, the occupying Power insisted in the German press, both in Germany and Belgium, on these two pretexts: The unemployed constitute a danger to public order, and a burden on official benevolence.

The letter we addressed to the Governor-General and to the head of his political department on October 16, replied to this as follows:—

“You are well aware that public order is in no wise threatened, and that all influences, moral and civil, would support you spontaneously were it in danger. The unemployed are not a burden on official benevolence; it is not from your funds that they receive assistance.”

In his reply, the Governor-General no longer urges these two considerations, but

he alleges that doles to the unemployed, from wherever they may come at present, must finally be a charge upon our finances, and that it is the duty of a good administrator to lighten such charges ; he adds " that prolonged unemployment would cause our workmen to lose their technical proficiency, and that, in the time of peace to come, they would be useless to industry."

True, there were other ways in which our finances might have been protected. We might have been spared those war-levies which have now reached the sum of a thousand million francs, and are still mounting up at the rate of forty millions a month ; we might have been spared those requisitions in kind which represent several thousands of millions, and are exhausting us.

There were other ways of providing for the maintenance of professional skill among our workpeople, such as leaving to Belgian industry its machinery and accessories, its raw materials and its manufactured goods, which have passed from Belgium into Ger-

many. And it is not to the quarries and lime-kilns to which the Germans themselves declare they will send our unemployed, that our specialists would think of going to complete their professional education.

The naked truth is that every deported workman is another soldier for the German army. He will take the place of a German workman who will be made into a soldier. Thus the situation which we denounce to the civilised world may be reduced to these terms : Four hundred thousand workmen have been thrown out of work by no fault of their own, and largely on account of the *régime* of the occupation. Sons, husbands, and fathers of families, they bear their unhappy lot without murmuring, respectful of public order ; national solidarity provides for their most pressing wants ; by dint of a generous parsimony and self-denial, they escape extreme destitution, and they await with dignity, and in a mutual affection which our national mourning intensifies, the end of our common ordeal.

Bands of soldiers break into their peaceful homes, snatch youths from their parents, the husband from his wife, the father from his children, guard with fixed bayonets the doors through which wives and mothers attempt to pass to bid a last farewell to those who are leaving them ; marshal their captives in groups of forty or fifty, and hoist them forcibly into open trucks ; the engine stands ready under full steam ; as soon as the train is full a superior officer gives the signal for departure. Here we have another thousand Belgians reduced to slavery ; condemned, without previous trial, to the severest penalty in the penal code save the death-penalty—deportation. They know not where they are going, nor for how long. All they know is that their work will benefit no one but their enemies. From some of them, by bribes or threats, an engagement has been extorted which is shamelessly called “ voluntary.”

Moreover, though the unemployed are certainly enrolled, a very large number of those recruited—one-fourth in the district

of Mons—are men who have never been out of work, men of a great variety of callings : butchers, bakers, master-tailors, brewers' assistants, electricians and agriculturalists ; even quite young lads have been taken, students at university colleges or other higher schools.

And yet two high authorities of the German Empire formally guaranteed the liberty of our compatriots to us. After the capitulation of Antwerp, the distracted population was asking what would happen to Belgians of military age, or such as would reach that age before the occupation had ended. Baron von Heune, the military Governor of Antwerp, authorised me to reassure the distressed parents in his name. However, as there were rumours in Antwerp that at Liége, Namur, and Charleroi, youths had been seized and forcibly carried off to Germany, I begged Governor von Heune to be so good as to confirm in writing the oral assurances he had given me. He replied that the rumours of deportations were baseless, and gave me, without hesitation, the following written declaration, which was read

aloud on Sunday, October 18, 1914, in all the parish churches of the Province of Antwerp: "Young men need have no fear of being carried off to Germany, either to be enrolled in the army, or to be subjected to forced labour."

Immediately after the arrival of Baron von der Goltz in the capacity of Governor-General at Brussels, I went to ask him to ratify the guarantees given by Governor von Heune to the Province of Antwerp, extending them to the whole country, without any time limit. The Governor-General retained my petition, in order to consider it at his leisure. The following day he was good enough to come in person to Mechlin to express his approval, and, in the presence of two aides-de-camp and of my private secretary, to confirm the promise that the liberty of Belgian citizens would be respected.

In my letter of October 16 last to Baron von Bissing, after reminding him of the undertaking given by his predecessor, I concluded: "Your Excellency will understand how painful

the burden of responsibility I should have incurred towards families would be, if the confidence they placed in you through me and at my earnest entreaty should be so lamentably disappointed."

The Governor-General replied: "The employment of the Belgian unemployed in Germany, which has only been initiated after two years of war, differs essentially from the captivity of men fit for military service. Moreover, the measure is not related to the conduct of war properly speaking, but is determined by social and economic causes."

As if the word of an honest man could be cancelled at the end of a year or two years like an officer's lease!

As if the declaration confirmed in 1914 did not explicitly exclude both military operations and forced labour!

Finally, as if every Belgian workman who takes the place of a German workman did not enable the latter to fill a gap in the German army!

We, the shepherds of these sheep who are torn from us by brutal force, full of anguish at the thought of the moral and religious isolation in which they are about to languish, impotent witnesses of the grief and terror in the numerous homes shattered or threatened, turn to souls, believing or unbelieving, in Allied countries, in neutral countries, and even in enemy countries, who have a respect for human dignity.

When Cardinal Lavigerie embarked on his anti-slavery campaign, Pope Leo XIII., as he blessed his mission, said: "Opinion is more than ever the queen of the world; it is on this you must work. You will only conquer by means of opinion."

May divine Providence deign to inspire all who have any authority, all who are masters of speech and pen, to rally round our humble Belgian flag for the abolition of European slavery!

May human conscience triumph over all sophisms, and remain steadfastly faithful to the great precept of Saint Ambrose:

Honour above everything! *Nihil præferendum honestati!*

In the name of the Belgian Bishops.*

(Signed)

D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER.

Archbishop of Mechlin.

* We have been unable to communicate with the Bishop of Bruges.

WWI Pam - Dec. 2002

149477

